

BOOK REVIEWS

Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993). Reviewed by Allen Guttmann, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA.

Leni Riefenstahl may well be the century's most controversial filmmaker, as well as one of the most celebrated in an international context. At the center of the controversy is the film that most interests sports historians: *Olympia*. Opinions about this film tend to be extreme. Is the two-part documentary an aesthetic masterpiece that would have pleased Pierre de Coubertin (as the 1936 games *did* please him)? Or was the film a political statement that directly benefitted the Nazi regime and indirectly contributed to all the subsequent horrors perpetrated by Hitler and his henchmen? Simply to say that *Olympia* was both, an aesthetic masterpiece *and* a political statement, does not resolve the problem nor does such an equivocal answer satisfy the question of Riefenstahl's moral responsibility.

Her answer, adamantly repeated in countless statements and presented in definitive form in her memoirs, is unambiguous and unambivalent. She is an apolitical artist of lamb-like innocence, hounded by men and women whom she characterizes as treacherous or vindictive or merely as mercenary. Culpable only of misplaced trust, Riefenstahl and her beloved mother appear in her memoirs as Nazi victims who deserve our pity. What is most unsettling about her lengthy *apologia* that resolutely refuses to apologize is that there are unquestionably elements of truth in some of her protestations.

No one doubts that she is a remarkable woman. Born in 1902 into a comfortably middle-class Berlin home, she was moved, when still a child, by two related passions that converge in *Olympia*: sports and modern dance. (Among the many sports she practised, skiing seems to have been her favorite.) Despite her father's protests (but with her mother's support), she became a very successful dancer and might well, had it not been for an injury, be remembered today as another Mary Wigman or Martha Graham.

The misfortune of her injury was followed by a lucky accident. She saw a poster advertising *Berg des Schicksals*, a film by Arnold Fanck, a director known for films of adventure set in romantically misty mountain landscapes. Thrilled by the film, she set off for the Dolomites and introduced herself to Fanck, who was soon taken by her dark-haired beauty and her reckless courage. Before long, she was scaling cliffs, paddling on Greenland's icy waters, and performing other feats usually reserved for stuntmen with no great desire for longevity. At one point, Fanck arranged for her to leap from an airplane just before it crashed into a glacier. To no one's surprise, Fanck fell in love with this embodiment of all his fantasies; she, however, preferred men like Ernst Udet (who daringly piloted the plane she leaped from).

Unfulfilled by her life as an actress, she longed to direct her own films. She raised enough money to make *Das blaue Licht*, in which she played the starring role

of Junta, a wild girl who lives alone in the mountains and guards the secret of an almost inaccessible cave filled with mysteriously glowing crystal (symbolic of romantic aspiration). Junta falls to her death, perhaps intentionally, when an artist whom she had befriended betrays the secret of the cave to the villagers in the valley below. They are *Untermenschen* driven by crassly material motives. Having always hated Junta, they are delighted to loot her cave. Adolf Hitler told Riefenstahl that he loved the film.

Whether Riefenstahl loved Hitler is another of those difficult questions. She admits that she was fascinated by him, by the hypnotic appeal of his oratory, by the force of his monomaniacal personality. The fascination seems to have been mutual. Hitler is alleged to have told a confidant, before meeting her, "The most beautiful thing I have ever seen in a film was Riefenstahl's dance on the sea in *The Holy Mountain*" (105/1:157) Meeting her intensified his interest. Riefenstahl claims, after recounting one of their many conversations, "That evening I felt that Hitler desired me as a woman" (229/1:312). She emphatically denies, however, the accusation that she became Hitler's mistress and performed nude dances for the delectation of Nazi bigwigs. The lurid scenes described in the "diary of Eva Braun" she claims to have been vindictive fabrications by Luis Trenker, her former lover, who published the faked diary. (On this point, her denials seem quite credible).

Riefenstahl also claims to have attracted the unwanted attentions of Josef Goebbels, whose clumsy attempts at rape provide what I take to be unintentional moments of comedy. (Humor is not Riefenstahl's strong point.) Since Goebbels, like most of those who appear in the memoirs, is dead, there is no way to confirm or disconfirm Riefenstahl's account of him.

And this is the main difficulty. *Triumph des Willens*, the film Riefenstahl made of the 1934 *Parteitag* at Nuremberg, is unquestionably a work of art, in the sense that it is a technical masterpiece, and unquestionably a work of propaganda, in the sense that it is a technical masterpiece, and unquestionably a work of propaganda, in the sense that it presents a radically one-sided political interpretation of the Nazi regime. She insists that she had no interest in politics and that Hitler forced her to make the film. Who knows? Nonetheless, while it may be true that she acted under duress, she never acknowledges that thousands of other artists -- in film and in every other medium -- refused to serve the regime as she did. They went into exile, like Thomas Mann and Kurt Weill, or they contented themselves with "*unbemalte Bilder*" ("unpainted pictures"), like Emil Nolde. We have no right to condemn Riefenstahl because she declined the opportunities of martyrdom, but she might in her memoirs have acknowledged that *Triumph des Willens* was beneficial to the Nazis -- and to her career as a film-maker (at least in the short run).

While admitting that she made *Triumph des Willens* at Hitler's behest, she accepts full responsibility for *Olympia* and denies that Goebbels had any influence whatsoever on the film. In fact, she maintains that he tried and failed many times to hamper her and to pervert the content of the film. Once again, the historian is confronted with the fact that she is the only one left to tell the tale. Diligent scholars, like Hajo Bernett, have gone through the surviving documents, but the written record is and probably always will be insufficient for us to render a definitive judgment of her claim of artistic freedom heroically preserved.

We can study the film. In my view, *Olympia* is no more a work of propaganda than Ichikawa Kon's documentary of the 1964 games or David Wolper's *Visions of Eight*, in which eight directors from around the world were allowed to offer their interpretations of the 1972 Olympics. *Olympia's* introduction evokes the origins of the games in ancient Greece and asserts symbolically, by means of the torch relay, that Berlin is the legitimate heir of Olympia, but this is unquestionably in the spirit of Coubertin, who emphasized the continuity between past and present. It is true that Hitler appears in Part I not only as the man designated by Olympic protocol to declare the games open but also as an all-too-human spectator thrilled by his team's victories and chagrined by their defeats. It is also true that Part II dwells too long (for my taste) on the equestrian events in which the German team, composed of military officers, excelled. Nonetheless, Riefenstahl never mentions the fact that the Germans "won" the games with more medals than any other nation. She foregoes many opportunities to show German victories and she films a number of German losses, including a particularly lopsided defeat at the hands of the Indian field hockey players.

American and other foreign athletes, who dominated the track-and-field events that are the focus of Part I, are shown positively. Indeed, I have never discussed the film with anyone who doubted that Jesse Owens is the film's hero. His extraordinary performance was in itself a disconfirmation of Nazi ideology. Upon his black body Riefenstahl's camera seems to linger with the same erotic fascination that she revealed decades later when she photographed the African wrestlers who are the focus of *The Last of the Nuba*. Among the very few athletes who figure as prominently as Owens is another "non-Aryan," the Korean runner Kitei Son, whose victory in the marathon is presented as another triumph of the will. Cooper C. Graham's conclusion seems just: "In its fairness to all nations, the film disarms criticism."¹

On the whole, Riefenstahl demonstrates *far* less interest in who won and who lost than she does in the aesthetic possibilities of bodies in motion. (The famous diving sequence of Part II, ignores the individuality of the athletes and transforms them all into elements in a work of art.) Some, including Richard Mandell in the preface to the second edition of *The Nazi Olympics*, have argued that Riefenstahl's passion for physical prowess, especially for *male* prowess, is in itself suspect. Does not her obsession with beautiful bodies, black and white, imply a cult of strength that leads, inevitably, to the desire to destroy whatever is weak or "degenerate"? Although this is indeed the implication of Nazi "logic," I do not believe that admiration of strength necessarily ends in hatred of weakness. It is an unfortunate fact of life that the glorification of *any* human attribute or achievement can be felt as denigration by those who lack the attribute or are unable to equal the achievement. I wish that I were able to run four hundred meters in forty seconds, to win Oscars as the male lead in Bertolucci's films, and, simultaneously, to contribute to the development of quantum mechanics. No such luck. I am not ready, on that account, to accuse Riefenstahl of fascist tendencies.

In her extended effort at self-exculpation, Riefenstahl points to the many honors showered upon *Olympia*, not only by German authorities but also by conclaves of foreign critics at various film festivals. She *did* receive accolades. French film

critics, referring to the film as *Les Dieux du stade*, were ecstatic and Riefenstahl received the first prize at the biennale in Venice (over the protests of the Americans, who preferred *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*).² She does not, however, admit that there may still be men and women of good will who wish that she were more open about her relations with the Nazi regime.

Olympia, which took two years to edit, appeared in 1938. The German edition of Riefenstahl's memoirs was published some fifty years later. By that time, Riefenstahl had lived through the war, survived a series of arrests and war-crimes investigations, and tried and failed to continue her career as a film-maker. (The closest she came was the film *Tiefland*, which she was never able to complete in a manner satisfactory to her.) After numerous trials and tribulations, all of which she documents in great detail, Riefenstahl discovered the Nuba of Sudan.

She tells us that she fell in love with them and there is no reason to doubt her. They appealed to her primitivism. She was an ecstatic observer of their ritual sports and she was horrified when the Nuba succumbed to the attractions of modernity. Revisiting Nubaland, she found "all the wrestlers were wearing gaudy trousers in all sorts of colours, and the lovely calabashes that had adorned the backs of their belts were now frequently replaced with plastic bottles or even empty cans" (557:2:343).

Although her projected film on the Nuba was never made (another disappointment narrated in great detail), she did publish two books of photographs of the Nuba (minus the plastic bottles and tin cans) that brought her, once again, worldwide acclaim. At the age of seventy, she learned to dive and began to photograph the wonders of submarine life. The entire second half of her book is narrated as a kind of counterpoint between lively accounts of her adventures as an artist and deadly summaries of her legal actions against the legions of her enemies. There is some danger that readers are likely to finish the book in one of two moods, believing that Leni Riefenstahl is either (a) a saintly martyr or (b) a paranoid maniac. No one is likely to call her a bore. Some might call her a flake.

About the translation, little needs to be said. There are minor mistranslations; when Riefenstahl says that she was "infected" by Hitler's charismatic performance, the unidentified translator substitutes "deeply affected" (101; 1:152), which does her a small injustice. The translator also has a tendency to simplify the narration by leaving out details. Riefenstahl tells us that she swam, as a child, with the famous Berlin club *Nixe*, but the translator is content with "a swimming club" (6; 1:18). On the whole, however, the English -- in my opinion -- reads better than Riefenstahl's melodramatic German, which often sinks to the level of pulp fiction. The photographs enhance the book's importance, but they are not always as impressive as one might have expected from a woman thought by many to be among the greatest visual artists of the century.

Notes

I. Cooper C. Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1986), p. 255. Graham, who indicates that there were five versions of the film, seems to accept Riefenstahl's assertion that the versions differed only in the language of narration. Glenn B. Infield refers to sixteen versions, each including "triumphs of the

athletes of the nation for which it was intended” (*Leni Riefenstahl: The Fallen Film Goddess* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976], p. 153. If there is evidence to support Infield’s assertion, I am unaware of it.

2. Walt Disney did not take the snub personally; when Riefenstahl visited Hollywood late in 1938, he was the only producer to receive her in a friendly manner.